

# Rotel RDV-995/RSX-972

## Exciting AV combination with an ear for music

Andrew Everard is hugely impressed with this purposeful, frill-free DVD-Video player and AV receiver, which plays music as well as it does films

Advocates of 'the latest and the most' in the home-cinema world would have you upgrading your system about every six months or so. Made the leap from VHS and Dolby Pro-Logic to DVD-Video and Dolby Digital? Too late – now you'll be told you need not just five channels and a subwoofer, but six channels. Or seven. Not to mention junking that shiny new DVD-Video player in favour of one able to play both films from disc and the DVD-Audio format. Or DVD-Video and Super Audio CD. Or indeed even all three.

Indeed, some would suggest that in fact you could need nine channels and a subwoofer just to cope with the various permutations of the current meagre line-up of DVD-Audio multichannel discs! What are the extra channels over the conventional 'three across the front, two surrounds and a sub' configuration? Well, side channels to fill in the soundstage, and an additional pair of height information speakers, mounted a couple of metres above the main front left and right pair. It seems some discs are using the channel usually employed for the subwoofer to height information. Just the thing, we're told, for that 'front row of the stalls' experience.

Assuming you're not now looking around your room trying to work out which wall is brick – after all, you don't want to bang your head against the wrong one! – the chances are you'll have some solidarity with Rotel, which has chosen to ignore all these nascent formats, and stick with tried and tested technology to play multichannel to a high standard, as well as maintaining standards when it comes to playing music. Yes, in stereo, from CDs.

The duo in question is the £700 RDV-995 DVD-Video player and £1000 RSX-972 AV receiver, both made with an eye to the massive US 'home theater' market, but shorn of frills in an attempt to keep signal paths as simple and direct as possible, in the quest for enhanced performance. Yes, the

receiver comes with a learning remote handset able to control a complete system (it's available separately, as the £80 RR-969), but beyond that is very much plain vanilla beside some of its 'fruit syrup, coconut sprinkles, hundreds and thousands and would you like a Flake?' opposition.

This does mean that on paper the Rotels may seem relatively poor value, especially if specification sheets, not performance, get you all excited. The DVD player has no onboard digital decoder, so no 5.1 channel audio outputs, but merely passes either a digital datastream or two-channel analogue audio to the outside world. Meanwhile, the receiver has 5.1 channel inputs and outputs, allowing external decoders (or the forthcoming DVD-Audio or SACD multichannel audio players) to be connected, along with additional power amplifiers for all channels, and Dolby Digital, DTS and Dolby Pro-Logic decoding to turn suitable soundtracks into multichannel outputs. There's also a range of digitally synthesised acoustic modes to convert stereo material into the same

seems to lack for power, whether belting out one of those roller-coaster science-fiction or action movies about which 'home cinema' enthusiasts seem to get unnecessarily passionate or delivering a symphonic work in stereo. You see, both player and receiver have had the money spent in all the right places.

### Rotel RDV-995

For example, the player is a twin-pickup design, with separate optical assemblies for DVD-Video and CD playback, ensuring compatibility with CD-R and CD-RW discs. It's also a simple-looking device, slimline and with a minimum of buttons on the fascia – very unusual for a DVD player! – while inside the usual Rotel policy of shortened signal paths and high-quality components in the signal path has been followed, to good effect. Used as a CD player run straight into my reference system via its stereo outputs the Rotel showed none of the thin, edgy and at the same time overblown sound that so often plagues players of this kind when

video socket (with a suitable cable supplied) or in component form for optimal picture quality with a suitable TV set. Digital audio connections, meanwhile, are on both optical and electrical feeds.

### Rotel RSX-972

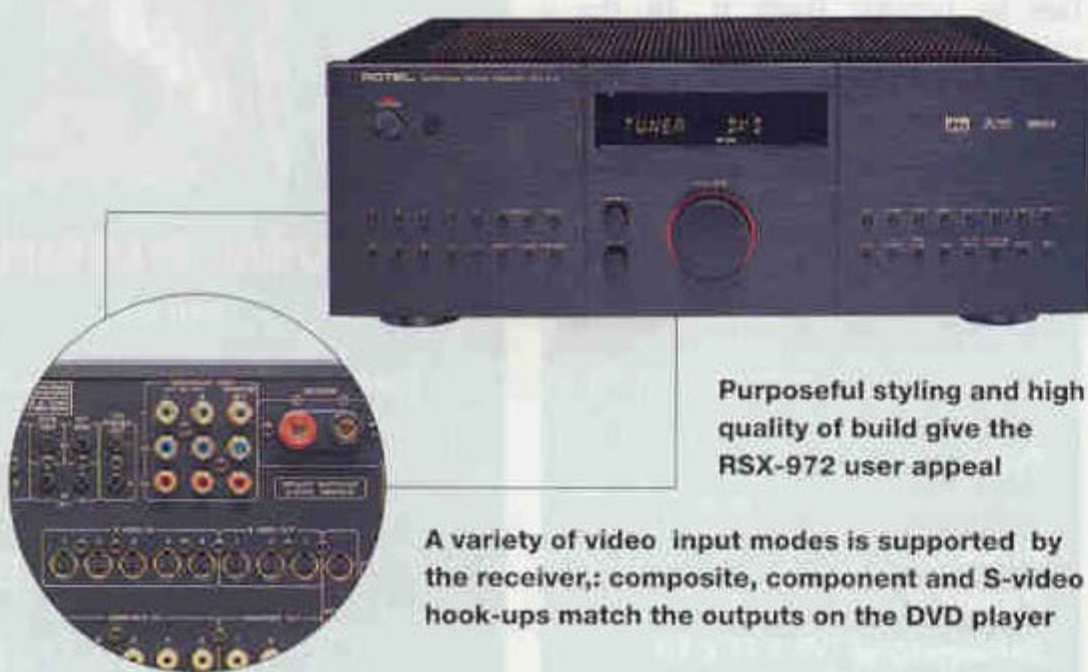
The receiver is relatively lavishly appointed, with no shortage of inputs, both digital and analogue, to handle even complex systems, and even a high-quality FM RDS/AM radio tuner, with 30 presets to store favourite stations. It can pass video signals in all three of the formats available from the player, switching them and outputting to a TV set, and has exemplary on-screen menus to help you set up the receiver, even if these lack the visual tricks of some rivals in this arena. Everything you need to get the receiver 'dialled-in' is there, and set-up is remarkably fast.

Yet the Rotel still manages to adhere to its manufacturer's 'simple but high-quality' philosophy. The fascia is clear and easy to use, while the internal layout makes it obvious that money has been spent on getting the sound quality right, not building in facilities few will ever use. Finally, confidence is inspired by the use of well-spaced good-quality combination binding-post/banana terminals – rare in this area of the market.

In fact the only real frill here is another nod to the US market, in the form of an independent output for a second zone, allowing signals to be fed to a power amplifier in another room. Two different sources can be fed to the two zones, with their own volume controls and even provision for a second infrared sensor for remote control, plus an infrared repeater to control other components.

### Performance

If you want a system capable of music in stereo and DVD-Video replay in surround, then the best option remains a high-quality two-channel set-up combined with an external Dolby Digital/DTS processor to decode signals and power the extra speakers. However, if you want a one-box solution for all the amplification duties, the Rotel receiver is as fine a compromise as you're going to find in a somewhat crowded market. It delivers both feature films



Purposeful styling and high quality of build give the RSX-972 user appeal

A variety of video input modes is supported by the receiver; composite, component and S-video hook-ups match the outputs on the DVD player

music now apparently being played in increasingly larger spaces (to be charitable) or a well-tiled drained swimming pool (if charity goes hang). To be fair, the Rotel's DSP effects are more subtle than those found in many a rival, but all the same they need not detain us further.

Even the power output of the RSX-972 seems unimpressive beside the three-figure boasts of many a lower-priced rival: it delivers just 75W to each of its five sets of speaker outputs. But Rotel's claims seem modest when the receiver is in action: it never

used for music replay. Instead the RDV-995 has a reassuring weight and assurance to the way it plays everything from solo voices to big symphonic works: even now it's not a match for the best dedicated CD players in the sub-£500 arena, but it's a lot closer than most.

That's impressive, especially when you consider the amount of video processing going on under the lid, with its high-speed clocks running and other potential sources of interference. On that subject, the Rotel can output video as a composite signal on a single phono socket, via an S-





Simple, uncluttered fascia of the Rotel DVD-Video player (above), and (right) the unit has all the essentials for good AV



and music DVDs to a very high standard, whether Dolby Digital/DTS encoded or just two-channel with Dolby Surround, and thus handled by the analogue Pro-Logic decoder. It's also very convincing with music sourced from CD, or from its own tuner.

To test the 5.1 channel abilities I used DVD-Video programming from music-related films such as *Hilary and Jackie* and *Topsy Turvy* to concert and opera discs including Muti's 2000 New Year's Day concert with the Vienna Phil and Arthaus Musik's 1998 Berlin *Swan Lake*. Also to hand were a number of films with powerful soundtrack scores: *Gladiator*, Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*, and even *The Sound of Music*.

This last may seem an odd choice, but the two-disc set, used here in its Region 1 form as this was written before the April Region 2 release date, has the original soundtrack lovingly remastered in 4.0 format – four channels, no subwoofer – by the people at THX, not to mention a gorgeous picture transfer. It's a film much derided – too many Christmas afternoon TV screenings, perhaps – but the DVD allows the viewer to appreciate fully the skill of Richard Rodgers' composition, and the lyrical twists of Oscar Hammerstein II. If you have any leanings to musical theatre whatsoever, this set comes very highly recommended.

It soon became clear that, with this kind of material, what the Rotel combination lacks in sheer

showmanship – although it's not short of power, speed or dynamic ability – it more than makes up for in its musical finesse, and the ability to extract even fine details of ambience and atmosphere.

With a well-recorded, well-mastered DVD-Video title there's a fine sense of instrumental and vocal timbre, and the clarity on hand allows the drama of John Williams' score to be followed even during the mayhem of *The Lost World's* T-Rex rampage in the streets of San Diego. Change pace to the Muti concert and the combination of orchestral power and credible ambience shows the ability of the format to add to the musical experience, not detract from it. Yes, the Rotel receiver in particular is big and rich-sounding, but this never gets in the way of its rhythmic acuity, or its sweet but explicit treble.

The receiver's tuner section proves to be of a very high standard, sounding clean and well weighted with Radio 3 concerts and spoken word on Radio 4 alike, but the real revelation is how well the RSX-972 handles music sourced from CD. Given its other abilities, it's no criticism to say that the receiver's stereo performance is on a par with that of a very good amplifier in the sub-£500 class, with a well-integrated, highly musical presentation that's as well adapted to orchestral works as it is to solo recitals.

Piano recordings prove very convincing when played from the RDV-995 into the receiver, while

the interplay of the musicians in chamber works is clearly defined, and takes place in a believable soundstage picture. Voices, too, have none of the steely edge I've encountered when played on too many products trying to be all things to all users, and while there may be a little too much sweetening going on with female singers in particular, this is infinitely preferable to a treble-happy sting that proves fatiguing on the ear.

Playing music from a very good CD player (the Marantz CD-7) into the RSX-972 reveals the true quality of the receiver as a stereo amplifier – even its tone controls are very subtle in their action, and well suited to taming wayward recordings. However, the real revelation here proved to be the DVD player, which is one of the very best of its kind. You'd need to spend a lot more money to better its performance as a source of multichannel sound and pictures, and for CD playback it's more than respectable, too.

At turns capable of striking cinematic effects – try the first major Coliseum battle sequence in *Gladiator* for proof of that – and musical subtlety, the Rotel duo is as close as anything like sensible money will get you to a perfect movies/music compromise, short of following the two-box amplifier/processor route I outlined earlier. No, it's no match for a well-chosen CD player and stereo amplification if all you want to do is play music, but that should in no way detract from its appeal. ©

## Rotel RDV-995

**Type** DVD-Video player

**Price** £700

**Formats supported** DVD-Video, Video CD, CD, CD-R/RW

**Output formats** PAL or NTSC

**Audio outputs** Analogue stereo, electrical and optical digital

**Video outputs** Composite, S-video, component video

**Accessories supplied**

Remote control, S-video cable, audio/video cables

**Dimensions (W x H x D)**  
440 x 92 x 314mm

## Rotel RSX-972

**Type** AV receiver

**Price** £1000

**Formats supported** Dolby Digital, DTS, Dolby Pro-Logic

**Digital inputs**

2 optical, 3 electrical

**Line inputs** 6, plus 1 in/out loop

**Video inputs** 5 composite, 5 S-video, 2 component

**Video outputs**

Monitor out on composite, S-video and component, plus 3 outputs on composite/S-video

**5.1 channel input** Yes

**Preamplifier outputs**

5.1 channel from surround processor, zone 2 stereo

**Tuner** FM RDS/AM, 30 presets

**Tone controls**

**Accessories supplied**

RR-969 learning remote control handset

**Dimensions (W x H x D)**  
445 x 160 x 400mm

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